THE WOMAN PROBLEM

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DR. Mildred B. Mitchell (9) has pointed out that women do not hold administrative and honorific positions in the APA "in proportion to their numbers and qualifications" and that especially do they fail of election to "top-level" offices, being frequently chosen for the more laborious job of secretary.

Dr. Mitchell is right, of course. Women are accorded less recognition than men in the professions and in public life. We hardly need more statistics to prove that. The APA has had only two women presidents out of its 59, one in 1905, one in 1921, and none in the last half of its existence when its increasing size makes election so much more difficult. Only about 8 per cent of the persons listed in *American Men of Science* (1933 edition) were women. Less than 6 per cent of the 127 psychologists starred in the first seven editions of this directory were women. The National Academy of Sciences (1950) has among its 461 members only three women. The American Philosophical Society (1950), not limited to science, has among its 486 members only 8 women. Neither of these societies has any women among its honorary foreign members. Less than 8 per cent of the entries in *Who's Who in America* are for women. There can be no question that professional women acquire less prestige than professional men "in proportion to their numbers," but *why?* Is it not time to stop confirming this obvious fact and to attempt to get some understanding of the underlying social dynamics?

Certainly the Woman Problem is not solely a problem for and about women. It will be comprehended best when it is considered in relation with similar problems of social dynamics.

The Woman Problem is, for instance, related to the Great Man problem. Do science and thought and history, we may ask, advance stepwise by the successive contributions of great men, or is intellectual progress more or less continuous? Does history perhaps merely select the names of certain men as indices of advances in thought and knowledge, while neglecting the antecedent, the contemporaneous and the subsequent events that are necessary for getting a great discovery ready to be made and then afterward getting it accepted as truth? The Great Men of history are the men who achieved great prestige, some of them while living, others posthumously. It appears, moreover, that prestige is gained or lost, not only by achievement, but also by such other reinforcers and inhibitors as the timing of the discovery, the inertia of contemporaneous thought, the way in which the discovery is promoted or advertised, and the prestige of the discoverer—for prestige begets prestige; it has positive feed-back. When a man has first emerged from inconspicuousness, his subsequent acts gain attention more readily than before and his prestige tends to build itself up, especially if it is continuously supported by good work. The point here is that prestige is no simple function of merit. Neither men nor women gain prestige simply "in proportion to their qualifications" (in Dr. Mitchell's phrase). Thus it comes about that an understanding of the psychodynamics of the history of science will help in an understanding of the woman problem, for it is not only women who complain of history's injustice (1).

The Woman Problem is also similar to the youth problem. On the average, men make their greatest contributions to knowledge at the ages of 30–45, becoming less effective, less frequently productive, as they grow older. Harvey Lehman (5, 6, 7, 8, etc.) has plotted these productivity curves. The cause of decreasing frequency of original contributions by aging men is not yet known; perhaps it is wholly motivational. In general, prestige and the culture tend to preserve the status of once important men as they grow older, and in the American success-culture men often maintain prestige by slipping over into administration from the field of discovery. To some extent the past status of the old is supported by our culture, but that is not nearly so true here in the occident as it has been in the orient. As a rule the young men in

their thirties and forties are ready to take over from the oldsters, and to a considerable extent they do. Someone once proposed establishing a "Society of ExperimentING Psychologists" for men under forty, an active group free of the prestige inhibitions which were supposed to limit election to the Society of Experimental Psychologists—and indeed the new society was formed although under a different name. Now the grim reaper of middle age harvests the members of the younger society into the older—at age 40 or even sooner. We must not, however, forget the existence of this Youth Protest, comparable to the Woman Protest in being directed against the fixed prestige of older men. The chief difference here is that the young grow old, and change their views, whereas women never quite turn into men.

For men there is a standard operating procedure about the acquisition of prestige. In runs—for psychologists—something like this. First you get a PhD. Then you manage some good research and publish it. In that way, you get some recognition. You keep on with research, now accepting also some administrative responsibilities. If you continue to impress your profession with the quality of your performance, you are likely to develop intellectual claustrophobia. You find yourself presently seeking larger perspectives. Perhaps you write a book, a book that, bringing together the researches of others, affords you the needed scope for broad interpretation. Or you may get over into the administration of research or of other professional activities. You may even find psychology too confining and become a dean or a college president. All this is standard for psychologists. It applies approximately to every past president of the APA. I am not sure that it holds for theoretical physicists who seem to be able to find scope for broad interpretation within their science and thus may not need to escape from reseach to book-writing or administration. Nor am I sure that the rule applies to European scientists, for abroad custom supports the prestige of the older men in greater security than is the case in America. Nevertheless, if a woman wanted to be president of the APA, this would be the course for her to follow, except that in this curriculum she had better aim at writing a book than at being a dean. For its top honors the APA looks askance at administrators.

It seems probable that this standard course for the evaluation of prestige is connected with the normal American success-culture. Prestige springs from power and leads to more power, but not much power is required for dealing with little things. It is the book-writer and the administrator who handle the large theories and the broad policies, thus maintaining and enhancing their prestige as they gather in the fruits of success. It is my impression that it is at this upper level that women are most often blocked in the pursuit of prestige. If a woman wants power and prestige as an administrator, she runs up against the man-made world. It is not the APA which keeps women down, but the universities, industry, the government, the armed services. With top-level administrative jobs so hard for her to get, why then does she not write books? Sometimes she does, but the book that brings prestige should deal with broad generalities, and there is some indication that the women of our culture are more interested in the particular, and especially, if I may lift terms from Terman and Miles (10, 400f.), in the young, helpless and distressed. Rogers, the only clinical psychologist who until now had been president of the APA, came to fame through a general theory of therapy and a book about it. Scott, in applied psychology, came in through administrative success with personnel testing in the First World War. The exceptionally skillful practitioner—be he or she clinical psychologist, college teacher, or general physician—gains at most a local recognition which almost never admits him to the dictionaries of biography.

Another important contributor to prestige is job-concentration. Beardsley Ruml has spoken humorously of the 168-hour week for the fanatic who lives primarily for his job—he who eats, sleeps, and finds recreation only because he wishes to work better. These compulsive persons are very common among successful professional men and in business and statecraft. Such persons can undertake any job at any time in any place on earth, provided only it seems important enough. Now it has been remarked that these people make poor parents, and presumably they usually do. Thus it comes about that the Woman Problem is found to be affected by philosophy of living. Inevitably there is conflict between professional success and success as a family man or a family woman. That is not

to say, of course, that a man of exceptional ability can not save time from his profession to spend on his family, nor that maximal concentration is always maximally efficient in producing prestige; nevertheless the fact remains that you can not often do two things at once and that limited time is one of the factors that prevent achievement. Thus it is true that ambitious professional mothers have a grievance, for custom gives them greater responsibility for the children than it gives their husbands. It would have been desirable for Dr. Mitchell, had it but been possible, to separate in her statistics the married from the unmarried women, discarding the negligible unmarried men altogether. It would have been still better for her to have ignored sex and marital status, and to have used as a basic parameter measures of job-concentration for every member of the APA. What we are after is knowledge of the effects of professional fanaticism.

Now against this background of social dynamics, let us see what must usually happen to the ambitious woman member of the APA.

I do not believe that sex prejudice operates against women in APA elections to top-level offices. I can not prove this faith, but I think that on the average and given everything else equal, a male psychologist will vote for a woman in preference to a man—or for a member of any minority group that he thinks is underprivileged or discriminated against. Everything else is, however, not often equal and women are usually not preferred for the top-level jobs because some of their male competitors have more prestige.

Intelligence and special abilities will count for their possessor, man or woman, all through. Let that not be forgotten. It is only when a woman loses out in competition to a man of presumably equal intelligence and special skill that the Woman Problem emerges.

When the professional woman starts out on her career, she can be imagined as having two choices to make—although in fact it is doubtful that she really can do very much to choose her personality. She can not, of course, choose her level of intelligence, but she might perhaps attempt a decision about job-concentration and whether to work with particulars or generalities, in technology or in science. If she chooses less job-concentration in order to be a broader person, a better wife or a better mother, then she is perhaps choosing wisely but she is not choosing the maximal professional success of which she would be capable. She is in competition with fanatics—the 168-hour people—and she had better accept that bit of realism about job-concentration. Certainly she is less free than a man to choose work that deals with the large generalizations, because those jobs are associated with basic research, and the top positions in the universities are not as freely open to women as to men, whereas basic research under government auspices has not yet settled down into any permanent pattern.

All along the question of marriage interferes with the woman's assured planning. Can a woman become a fanatic in her profession and still remain marriageable? Yes, she can, for I know some, but I think a woman must be abnormally bright to combine charm with concentration. These women make the synthesis by being charmingly enthusiastic. The Woman Problem comes up again after the professional woman has acquired a husband and a couple of children, with the culture pressing to give her a heavy responsibility in the home, with her husband noting, perhaps, that his own success demands his own job-concentration. A couple can compromise and work out a fairly proportioned scheme for the good life as they see it, and some do just this. Perhaps two spouses, each on half-concentration, are better than one on full concentration, but the pair would not be elected president of the APA. Some women readers will undoubtedly think me callous to the frustration of others, but I am asking only for realism. Do you work at your profession 20, 40, or 80 hours a week? It makes a difference in competition, though it is not the only thing to make a difference; and the Woman Problem exists because there is this competition and invidious comparison.

There are about as many married as unmarried women in the APA (4, 14). Why not let the older unmarried women give up the thought of marriage and compete on equal footing with the men? Part of the answer to that question is that they will not be on equal footing. Nearly all the men are married, and a married man usually manages to make his marriage contribute to his success and prestige. Most of the married women do not receive the same professional support from their husbands and the unmarried women have no husbands. The only exception in favor of marriage

for professional women is that those women who look for success in the psychology of interpersonal relations and not for great prestige often believe that their marriages make better psychologists of them (4, 15f.). In general, marriage is not an asset for most professionally ambitious women psychologists.

When the unmarried woman seeks prestige at the upper levels, she finds that the administrative posts are not fully open to women. Nevertheless, she is free to seek public success by working with some kind of large generalities. That approach to prestige generally means writing a definitive discussion of an important topic in a book. You would think that ambitious women would take to book-writing more than they do, although it must be admitted that writing a book is more work than those who do not write them think. Still this is the right advice to give the women who seek prestige under our present cultural limitations. If they do not take the advice, perhaps the reason lies in Terman and Miles' observation that women are more concerned with the particular than the general.

Here then is the Woman Problem as I see it. For the ICWP or anyone else to think that the problem can be advanced toward solution by proving that professional women undergo more frustration and disappointment than professional men, and by calling then on the conscience of the profession to right a wrong, is to fail to see the problem clearly in all its psychosocial complexities. The problem turns on the mechanisms for prestige, and that prestige, which leads to honor and greatness and often to the large salaries, is not with any regularity proportional to professional merit or the social value of professional achievement. Nor is there any presumption that the possessor of prestige knows how to lead the good life. You may have to choose. Success is never whole, and, if you have it for this, you may have to give it up for that.

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